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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between the gender schema and sex typing. Drawing on previous research and personal experience, the suggestion is made that the two are distinct and separate, not necessarily co-occurring. It is further suggested that it is possible to activate the gender schema situationally. This will affect women of different sex types differently, but may have implications for their mental health regardless of sex type. Sex typing and gender schematicity are seen as distinct entities. While some researchers have suggested that individuals who are gender schematic also are sex-typed, others have suggested that one may be schematic for opposite-gender information. Cognitive structures or maps used in the processing of gender related information are referred to as gender schemas. Sex typing refers to societal expectations based on what is thought to be 'appropriate' for one or the other gender. The use of the gender schema to conform to society's expectations may cause difficulties for the woman who is herself experiencing its activation. Femininity has been found to be correlated with poorer mental health. This may be due to the specific qualities stereotypically seen as female, as well as to the limiting aspects of rigid gender roles. (Contains 25 references.) (Author)

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Triggering the gender schema: A theoretical proposition.

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the gender schema and sextyping. Drawing on previous research and personal experience, the author suggests that the two are distinct and separate, not necessarily co-occurring. It is further suggested that it is possible to situationally activate the gender schema. This will affect women of different sextypes differently, but may have implications for their mental health, regardless of sextype.

Sextyping and gender schematicity are seen as distinct entities. While some researchers have suggested that individuals who are gender schematic are also sextyped, others have suggested that one may be schematic for opposite-gender information. Cognitive structures or maps used in the processing gender-related information are referred to as gender schemas. Sextyping refers to societal expectations based on what is thought to be 'appropriate' for one or the other gender.

The use of the gender schema to conform to society's expectations may cause difficulties for the women who is herself experiencing it's activation. Femininity has been found to be correlated with poorer mental health. This may be due both to the specific qualities stereotypically seen as feminine, as well as to the limiting aspects of rigid gender roles.

Triggering the gender schema:
A theoretical proposition

The schema is a structure that integrates and processes incoming information. Thus information can be incorporated into the existing information network, and later recalled from memory. The term schema has been used to refer to a cognitive structure within the human processing system that organizes and guides the processing of incoming stimuli (Payne, Connor, & Colletti, 1987), directs our experience and at the same time is open to change (Archer & Lloyd, 1985). A primary function of schemas is to organize and simplify the incoming information and encoding of it, as well as facilitating later recall. This is done through providing a map or pattern of well-integrated knowledge structures, which can incorporate new information. Gaps in the new information can be filled in ways that are in keeping with the schema. That information for which there is not a map or structure will require more effort in order to register or incorporate, or may even be ignored. Individuals may use many different schemas, depending on which is relevant to the situation at hand. Cognitive structures concerned with processing information about gender have been referred to as gender schema.

Money and Erhardt (1972) suggested that, in establishing gender identity, each child establishes two sets of schemas that have immense power over social interactions and expectations. Money and Tucker (1975, p 88.) said that "One of these schemas

tells you what to expect of yourself, and how to relate to those of your own sex. The other tells you what to expect of and how to react to those around you of the opposite sex." A third schema is also proposed: the "human schema". The child is said to code as "human" all those items she or he perceives as not inherently feminine or masculine. "Encouraging a child to sex-code all behavior, starves the human schema, so that he or she becomes one of those people who are so overconscious of sex differences that they never notice the human similarities between men and women" (Money & Tucker, 1975 p. 127).

Bem (1981) proposed a model for the schematic processing of gender-related information. For Bem, being gender schematic means that a person has a "generalized readiness to encode information-including information about the self - in terms of the culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity" (p. 1193, 1982). Thus, individuals are feminine schematic, masculine schematic or aschematic. Bem seems to equate sex-typing with gender schema. "Gender schema theory proposes that in addition to learning such content-specific information about gender, the child also learns to invoke this heterogeneous network of sex-related associations in order to evaluate and assimilate new information. The child, in short, learns to encode and to organize information in terms of an evolving gender schema" (Bem, 1984, p. 307).

Markus, Crane, Bernstien, and Siladi (1982) propose an alternative approach to the schematic processing of gender-

related information, based on self-schema theory. This alternate formulation proposes that individuals may demonstrate gender-schematic processing with respect to both (feminine and masculine) dimensions of gender-related information. Individuals may be classified as feminine schematic, masculine schematic, schematic for both classes of information, or aschematic. Markus et al. (1982) did find that individuals were better at remembering information that was gender-appropriate for their gender, and that androgynous individuals responded equally quickly to feminine and masculine items.

Sex typing refers to the appropriateness of traits or behaviors, to one's gender as deemed by society. That which fits society's conception of what is average or normal for women or men can be said to be sex-typed. The Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry (1984) defines sex-typing as "any form of behavior or any attitude that results from social programming regarding appropriate male and female behavior". That which is sex-typed is defined as "denoting the labeling process whereby certain characteristics or responses are categorized as masculine or feminine in accordance with prevailing sex-role stereotypes". Bem (1987, p. 5) defines sex-typing as "the acquisition of sex-appropriate preferences, skills, personality attributes, behaviors, and self-concepts. Widom (1984 p. 5) defines sex-typed behaviors as "those stereotyped behaviors commonly associated with being a biological male or female. Sex-typed standards imply societal expectations for appropriate sex-role

behavior (Widom, 1984 p. 206). La Torre (1979) sees sex-typed society as desirable, and defines it as "one in which male and female roles are distinct" (p. 146). He also claims that "sex typing need not play any role in sexism" (p.147).

Being gender schematic is different from being sex-typed. Sex-typed individuals are those who conform to societal expectations for members of their sex. Those who are gender schematic are those who have thought about the issues of gender; for whom this pattern, map, or schema is the evaluation and encoding mechanism which deals with and assimilates information relevant to the self as well as pertaining to others. Bem says (1981a) that "highly gender-schematic individuals do not differ from others in their ability to organize information on the basis of gender, but in their threshold for doing so spontaneously" (p.197). She refers to individuals being gender-schematic, meaning that they have "a generalized readiness to encode and organize information... in terms of the culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity" (p. 1193, 1982). Gender schematic individuals can be seen as having a more readily available "map" for gender-related information, while sex-typed individuals can be characterized as conforming to societal expectations. Gender schema theory (Bem, 1984, p. 187) proposes "that the phenomenon of sex typing derives in part from gender-schematic processing" and further that "sex typing results in part from the assimilation of the self-concept itself to the gender schema. As children learn the contents of their society's gender schema,

they learn which attributes are to be linked with their own sex and hence with themselves". Gender schematic processing can be said to be developed as one learns about societal expectations based on gender. Internalizing these expectations in such a way as to conform to them, can be said to contribute to sex-typing. Individuals who display sex-typed behavior or traits may not necessarily be gender schematic, just as individuals who are highly gender schematic may not necessarily choose to conform to societal expectations. The gender schema can, however, increase the effective acquisition of sex-typed behavior and traits by providing the mechanism for organization, without which the traits and behaviors might be randomly acquired and displayed.

Gender schematicity refers to how well encoded this gender-related information is. Sextyped individuals conform to one of these maps or schemas. One who is gender schematic will process gender-related information more quickly than neutral information, especially if it is self-relevant information. This does not reflect agreement with societal values, just familiarity and practice with them.

It may be that while most individuals have an available gender-schema, it is not the most relevant self-schema for all individuals. Signorella and Frieze, (1986, cited in Lips, 1988) found that most individuals are not strongly gender-schematic, that is, their masculinity or femininity is not central to their self concept. Bem (1985) suggests that individuals can lessen the extent to which decisions are based on emphasized gender

distinctions. The differences between the sexes will still be acknowledged but will include a smaller number of traits, based more on biological differences than on stereotypes of appropriate behavior, interests or personality characteristics.

Gender schema can be measured in terms of speed of processing. Individuals who are strongly gender-schematic can be said to have more readily available gender schemata, which will facilitate speed of processing. Bem (1981a) found that individuals who scored as feminine or masculine on the BSRI were faster than those who scored as androgynous or undifferentiated when endorsing sex-appropriate stimuli and slower when endorsing sex-inconsistent stimuli. Bem further considers that the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) can be used to identify these individuals, that they endorse the traits on this inventory because they are gender-schematic. Markus et al. (1982) propose that those individuals who are schematic with respect to gender related stimuli (sex-typed individuals for sex-consistent information, and androgynous subjects for both masculine and feminine stimuli) should process the information or stimuli faster than will those who are aschematic for the class of information to which they are responding. Thus, the speed of processing gender-relevant information is an indication of the strength of gender schema.

There may be situational variables which trigger the gender-schema, as research has shown that schemas in general can be triggered. Kuethe (1962a) found that most people organize a given set of social objects in a similar manner. He states that

"social schemata are aroused when an individual is confronted with social objects. The specific content of the social objects determines which schema will be aroused" (1964, p. 23). Schemas can be aroused or triggered in response to social objects or cues in the environment. Gender schemas, too should

Situational triggers may call up or activate the gender schema at inappropriate moments. Most women have likely had the experience of being completely unaware of the relevance of their gender to a situation at hand, (because there is none) only to find that their gender or sex is the issue most salient to those around them. For many individuals, this may occur in the context of work on some task or participation in a meeting. The implication may be that one is behaving in way that is inconsistent with societal gender norms, and in doing so is being inappropriate. As LaTorre points out, " Our society is still largely sex typed and expects its individuals to have a moderate amount of sex typing. The individual who does not is seen as deviant and labelled as such. Society may reject him" (1979, p 144) or her. Similarly, one may engage in sex-typed behavior, only to find that this is also perceived as inappropriate to the situation. Something may occur to activate the individual's gender schema. The act of calling up the gender schema of a woman who is concerned about her femininity can serve to "put her in her place" and limit her participation in certain tasks. Morgan and Ayim (1984, p 189) note that females "cannot simply reject the female schema in favor of the male, for this choice

too is not only socially precluded but also punished". Women who are trying to free themselves of gender-based restrictions place themselves in a difficult position. There are repercussions for ignoring stereotypes, just as there are repercussions for internalizing them.

It is not enough to recognize that some individuals are more gender-schematic than others. People who are gender schematic may react to this in different ways. One person may use the gender schema to conform to sex-typed expectations, while another may use the same schema to avoid this. Schemas may be aroused by social objects, or by situational variables. It is important to examine the cues or environmental triggers that activate the gender schemata for individuals. Women may be restricted not only by what society allows, and by what they themselves allow, but also by not recognizing the cues or triggers that activate the gender schema.

Gender schematicity may or may not be correlated with sex-typing, but it is the mechanism by which efficient sex typing is made possible. Bem (1981) proposes that those individuals who are sex-typed will be more likely to use gender-schema in processing information. Gender schema serve a functional purpose in processing information, but provide the map or structure which may become so rigid as to impede our perceptions of ourselves and others. It may be that most functional individuals have some sort of gender schema available, and that for many individuals, this may be activated by subtle situational cues, of which one

may be unaware, and which can serve to inhibit functioning. For women who have a greater vested interest in being considered feminine, a simple reminder that something is "not ladylike" may be adequate to modify behavior.

High levels of femininity seem to have serious clinical implications for women. It has been argued that through female socialization, women are literally taught to respond to stress in powerless, helpless ways, and thus made more susceptible to depression (Cox & Radloff, 1984, Radloff, 1980). Femininity, or higher femininity scores, have been found to be positively correlated with higher levels of pathology (LaTorre, Endman and Gossman, 1976; LaTorre, 1978), neuroticism, low assertiveness, and low self esteem (Ray and Lovejoy, 1984). La Torre suggests that one reason "why feminine individuals could have more pathological scores is simply that femininity is associated with greater pathology" (1979, p.63). Ray and Lovejoy, however, found that masculinity was also correlated with lower self-esteem and low assertiveness, and concluded that those (undifferentiated) individuals who rejected polarized self-descriptions were healthier than others. Those qualities typically associated with femininity may pose risks for women, beyond the general limitations of rigid sex-based role differentiation.

The implications for the mental health of women who have internalized societal stereotypes (in such as way as to use them in self-evaluation) are grave. The gender schema makes the rigid internalization of sex-typed roles possible by providing a

structure or map, for efficient use of this information. Stereotypes are thought to grow out of schemas, which have powerful effects on information processing (Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, Scott, & de S. French, 1984). It is important to understand how these maps or schemata are triggered because certain qualities or behaviors stereotypically associated with femininity can be detrimental to the woman modeling them. It can also be destructive for those women who are not sex-typed in terms of either traits or behaviors, but who use the female schema as a self-evaluation prototype. It may be more useful to be aware of how this schema can be triggered than to attempt to alter the schema of an individual adult.

It hoped that this research will help to better understand the functioning of gender schema. It is apparent that there are individuals who are more or less gender-schematic; the current investigation proposes to document the activation of these schemata by a situational variable. The most gender-schematic individual of all is not constantly aware of his or her gender; the gender schema is not consistently in use. By recognizing that there are triggers or cues in the environment, individuals may become better prepared to deal with them more effectively.

The current author will examine whether or not gender schemata can be activated by environmental variables, and whether they are affected differently for different individuals. A response time latency will be used to measure the gender schema. Subjects will be asked to respond "me" or "not me" to a series of

descriptive adjectives. The time between presentation and response will reflect the availability of the gender schema. It is hypothesized that (individuals who are gender schematic will not necessarily be sex-typed), that the situational trigger will be correlated with a decrease in response time, indicating an increased availability of the gender schema, and that individuals who differ in initial gender schematicity may respond differently to the gender schema "trigger" stimulus.

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Author Notes

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